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Selection and Censorship: A Reappraisal

by Lester Asheim

To buy or not to buy, that is the question. None of us can escape either of those responsibilities if we really see ourselves as professionals charged with serving the entire community through the institution for which we are the appointed gatekeepers. Thirty years ago I wrote:

To the selector the important thing is to find reasons to keep the book. Given such a guiding principle, the selector looks for values, for virtues, for strengths, which will overshadow minor objections. For the censor, on the other hand, the important thing is to find reasons to reject the book. His guiding principle leads him to seek out the objectionable features, the weaknesses, the possibilities for misinterpretation . . .

The selector says, if there is anything good in this book let us try to keep it; the censor says, if there is anything bad in this book, let us reject it. And since there is seldom a flawless work in any form, the censor's approach can destroy much that is worth saving.¹

The reason it may be desirable to explore once again the differences between selection and censorship is the fact that in today's climate some serious thinkers, and more importantly many opinion leaders (who unfortunately are not always the same people), are raising the question: "Why should arrogant librarians be allowed to impose their preferences on materials that are purchased with other people's money?"

The key distortion in this attack is the underlying assumption that the approach librarians take to selection is based upon their own preferences, that books that are not bought are those the librarian happens not to like or care about, and that the collection is a direct reflection of the librarian's own pet peeves, preferences, and prejudices. I cannot say unequivocally that a library collection contains none of the books that the librarian likes to read, but I think I can say that any library in which any kind of profession-

al selection policy is in effect (whether written or not) will contain many works that the librarian does not like or agree with. What the collection reflects is the librarian's view of what readers and users want and need, whether the librarian likes it or not. The librarian's bias is that the collection should be unbiased. But an unbiased collection is precisely what many censors disapprove of.

Which leads us to an interesting dilemma. Selection is as much involved in building a collection that responds to the whole community as in building a collection that caters only to the interest of a special group. To make sure that there is something for everyone, which sounds like "anything goes," requires just as tight a control over purchases as special purpose selection. For one thing, there is only so much money, which means that not everything can be bought; there is only so much space, which means that everything that is published or released in other formats cannot be added. The librarian's duty is to see that the available money and space are used in the best interests of all those who are present or potential users of the library. But while money and space require that selection be exercised, they do not determine which individual items be selected. That is where the librarian's judgment enters.

A representative institution

In these days of mass media, Nielsen ratings, blockbusters, and bottom lines, the library has a unique responsibility. The mass agencies of communication think in terms of large, faceless audiences. The common denominator, not the individual differences, becomes the criterion. A library, on the other hand, strives to assure that while the interests of the majority are being met, the interests of the many minorities are being protected. It is characteristic of American democracy that the individual, the special case, has rights too, and the public library is one of American democracy's most representative institutions.

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So what we are saying, when we resist the removal of materials that have been selected for the library's collection or take exception to the restriction of materials that have already passed the test of relevance for a particular library, is not that questions may not be raised about the librarian's choices. It is that one segment of the library's total constituency should not be permitted to interfere with another segment's rights and that it is part of our responsibility to protect the rights of all.

The removal of materials threatens the democratic balance that the total collection is meant to represent, and while it is sometimes difficult to bleed, fight, and die for one book in a collection of thousands, there is a long-standing principle involved that should not be heedlessly overlooked in the heat of a momentary reaction to a single word, a private prejudice, or even a strongly-felt provocation. What we are saying is not that a member of the public does not have

complain.

The problem, of course, is not that certain books are forced on readers, but that readers make choices, and sometimes those choices do not coincide with the choices that the censorious would prefer them to have. It is the other person's right to choose that is being questioned by the censor, for even if librarians wanted to force the use of certain materials, they do not have the power to do so. As Samuel Goldwyn is purported to have said: "If the public doesn't come, no one can stop them." The grammar is a bit fractured, but the point is clear: when people have freedom of choice, they exercise it, and neither availability nor hype can make them choose any item they do not wish to choose.

Clearly, the problem is not that readers are coerced by librarians into using certain materials, but rather that people—given democratic freedom of choice—do not always choose as we would like them to. The censor's solution is to

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the right to express his or her opinions of our professional judgment, but rather that there should be a due process, taking all of the pertinent considerations into account, before a professional judgment is overthrown.

The right to choose

The response of the censorious, when a demand to remove an item from the collection is not immediately carried out, is: Why should this material, offensive to me, be rammed down my throat? Why are the morals of Las Vegas forced upon the citizens of Pleasantville?

These questions fall wide of the mark. The material picked out for repression sits in the library along with thousands of other books that the censor does not oppose. And there they all do, indeed, sit—approved or not—until someone chooses of his or her own volition to use them. The preponderance of books in a library are beyond criticism by any standard, and if shelf-space were a guarantee of wide public attention, not even the most censorious could

take away their freedom of choice. The social responsibility of the library is to preserve freedom of choice, and the selection policies of the librarians are designed to foster it.

If there is to be a confrontation between librarians and some members of the society, then the issue should be properly stated. The issue is broader than *Catcher in the Rye* or *Huckleberry Finn* or *Brave New World*. It is the right of the people in a democracy to have access to the widest possible variety of choices and freely to choose for themselves, on the basis of their own judgment. And notice that proviso: for themselves. Not for everybody else.

Limiting special interests

In the program "Are Libraries Fair?" held during the ALA conference in Philadelphia last year, Cal Thomas, vice-president of Moral Majority, urged that libraries open up the book selection process to the public. There's nothing wrong with the general principle that ways should be found to learn from patrons about their wants

and interests, to tap their satisfactions and their complaints and to be responsive to them. An informal system already works to provide that kind of feedback constantly to the librarian. But in the end, after one patron demands that a certain book be banned and another person insists that a certain book be bought, someone has to be responsible for the interests of the library's entire public, not just the interests of those who are vocal. And that is where librarians are called upon. Because by training, by experience, and through the exercise of professional skills, they are able, as particular interest groups often are not, to recognize and respond to those interests that differ from their own.

For the most part, those who would remove materials are motivated by the best of intentions; to keep what is right and to remove what is wrong, as they see it. I do not question the strength of their conviction nor the sincerity of their belief. But they tend to approach the library's collection as a case of "either/or" when to be truly responsive the library's motto must be "not only/but also."

I do not mean to suggest that any inquiry about the justification of a library's purchase is *ipso facto* censorship. What I am talking about are the actions that have been taken: the removal of books or parts of books, often in the form of theft or vandalism; the occasional but nevertheless actual burning of some library materials; the imposition of restrictions and barriers that reduce the number of ideas to which users may have access. The legal actions brought and the removal of librarians from their positions for doing what they were hired to do are a justifiable reason for concern not only about the specific instances themselves, but even more because of the "chilling effect" (a concept recognized by the courts) on future selection and freedom of access. Remember that the freedom we are talking about is not only our freedom to disseminate ideas; equally important is the public's freedom to receive ideas.

The one thing that reassures librarians that they are probably doing something right when they get into disagreements about the collection is that the protests are as vehement from the Left as they are from the Right, from the pro-somethings as from the anti-somethings. Each special interest group thinks its ideas are underrepresented while all others are overrepresent-

ed. It is seldom that any group can make the case that its ideas are not represented at all. The most they can say is that their perception is that ideas of which they do not approve appear to be more heavily represented than those they'd like to promote. And what is disturbing is that it almost invariably comes down to "let's get rid of" rather than "why don't you add?"

New words, old music

At least that's how it used to be, but today some of the censorious groups are getting more sophisticated. They have found, to their dismay, that the direct censorship and removal of materials is now frequently condemned, not only by librarians and other such humanistically-tainted types, but even by many of their own neighbors and fellow-citizens for whom they presume to speak. As a result, they have begun to alter their tone and—at least in the statements they make for public consumption—deny any desire to censor or remove materials. The aim, they say, is only to add the materials they favor in sufficient quantity to bring about a balance that is not now there.

They are also making tactical changes, such as adapting some of the arguments of the American Civil Liberties Union to their own purposes and, in the state of Washington at least, changing the name of the Moral Majority to the Bill of Rights Legal Foundation. It is a smart move, and if they really follow their new rhetoric, things may be looking up. I may be forgiven, I hope, in having some reservations about the sincerity of the new look, which, on the basis of past performance, could turn out to be more skillful public relations than a real change of heart.

Meanwhile, the change in rhetoric may be salutary both for them and for us. For them, because if they find themselves obliged to practice what they now publicly preach, it could change their approach to the materials that carry ideas. And for us, because if they begin to practice what they preach, we may have to do so as well.

We may have to listen to some of their complaints more seriously and look more carefully at what we do in the light of what they say we do. Up to now, we have been able to take refuge behind wisecracks, a sense of our own self-righteousness, and the assurance that the extremist groups are sure to go just far enough be-

yond reason to bring ridicule onto their own heads. Making the opposition look ridiculous is a delightful ploy; it is even better when the opposition makes itself look ridiculous with no help from us whatsoever. When the Mothers Against Smut, or some such group, a few years ago created a smut wagon filled with examples of obscenities from books and other sources and drove it around town for everyone to examine, they ended up in the pokey, quite rightly, for disseminating obscene materials. One always gets a certain satisfaction in seeing the biter bitten.

The put-down makes us feel good, of course, but such wisecracks as "The Moral Majority is neither moral nor a majority, and the New Right is neither, either," even if they convey a truth or a partial one, are an inadequate evaluation of the power of those groups. What's more, our satisfaction at getting a laugh can divert us from whatever may be worthy of consideration

Phyllis Schlafly (if you'll pardon the expression) back in 1981 suggested a test of libraries to her followers that we might ourselves adopt. In her article, "How to Improve Fairness in Your Library," she supplies a list of forty-eight titles that she feels local public libraries ought to have on their shelves in the categories of pro-life (meaning anti-abortion), pro-defense, pro-family, and pro-basic education. Her charge to her readers is to take this list and check it against their public library catalogs to see how many of them are there and then put the pressure on to add all the ones that aren't in the collection. She even adds a little list of pro-lib books as a check. Notice how sure she is of the library's bias; she's betting that few libraries will have any, or very many, of her preferred list.

ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom took Schlafly's advice and tried to check the extent to which the titles she recommends are missing from libraries. As you can guess, it is much

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in what the opposition is saying. I suggest to you that we should pay more attention to those who attack our purposes and our practices for two reasons: because so many people do and because we should be prepared to answer those attacks, if we can.

Asking the right questions

I hope you don't think I've gone over to the enemy by suggesting that they might, in some instances, just possibly be right. If, on occasion, they are correct in some of their accusations, we ought to be glad for their help in putting us back on any track from which we may have inadvertently strayed. They have already learned from us and have altered their tactics as a result. Do we now have something to learn from them, something that goes beyond the simple alteration of tactics to a reaffirmation of our basic principles? Insights and truths turn up in all kinds of odd places and contexts.

harder to establish factual evidence than it is to make broad, condemnatory generalizations, but a check was made of the holdings reported in the OCLC bibliographic network, which admittedly is not a very good source of information about small and medium-sized public libraries. On the basis of that quick and dirty survey, it appears that of the two titles Schlafly thought should be in all libraries (one written by her and one about her), 425 libraries in twenty-five states and the District of Columbia held a copy of one title, and 559 libraries in forty-six states and the District of Columbia held a copy of the other. Several of the other titles made an even better showing; several did less well.

This doesn't prove much except that Schlafly rather overstated her case. What we cannot yet prove is that libraries do give just as much attention to the prejudices on Schlafly's side as they do to the prejudices on other sides. I like to think that a really thorough search of library

holdings would show this to be true, because if it is not, librarians have some explaining to do.

The balanced collection

The key is balance, which does not necessarily mean an equal number of titles on every subject. But even a term like "balance" may not mean the same thing to different people. In his *Moral Majority Report* for March 1983, Jerry Falwell expands upon Phyllis Schlafly's suggested campaign to check libraries for conservative titles, to which he appends a much larger list of books that he thinks should be in the library. "If they don't put our books up," he says, "then take the liberal books down." In other words, balance to Falwell means a selected sample of titles from all other points of view as against the entire list of his recommendations.

But the librarian's responsibility is to identify interests and to make judgments with the entire collection and the entire community in mind, not just that part of it with the largest constituency or the loudest voices or the most intimidating threats. It sounds easier than it is, but that is true of all responsibilities. To make decisions, to make them for sound reasons, and to be able to defend them when they are questioned are characteristics of professional judgment that I like to think go with the librarian's territory.

The balanced collection, of course, will never completely satisfy the groups who want their own point of view more prominent. Against the more familiar complaints on the far Right—too much material on sex, too much material that is anti-religious, not enough material on the virtues of free enterprise and state's rights—there is the other extreme: not enough on sex, not enough material critical of the traditional religionist position, too much material "of interest to investors and business people."²

In other words, no subterfuge is going to avoid offending someone, and no amount of yielding to complaints is going to stop everyone. All we accomplish by giving in to such pressure is to shift the source of the complaints from those who want the material removed to those who want it retained and expanded. Which suggests that librarians may just have to take more responsibility for defining the nature of the collection, achieving balance as they see it, and be prepared for the denunciations. Have we known

all along that any decision of any importance will offend someone, and have we then chosen to offend only those we think have the least power to retaliate?

An answer to the censor

In 1774 Edmund Burke was speaking to a group of citizens prior to an election and reminded them, "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

Remember that in its eighteenth-century connotation, "your opinion" meant "your approbation." If we substitute the word librarian for representative, we find an answer to those who feel that as keeper of a publicly-supported institution, the librarian must defer to every complaint of pressure from a taxpayer: "Your librarians owe you, not their industry only, but their judgment; and they betray, instead of serving you, if they sacrifice it to curry your favor."

Librarians and users are in this together. We have a responsibility that goes with our title; they have a responsibility to try to see the total picture, not just their own segment of it. Both of us still have a lot to learn about the provision and dissemination of ideas, particularly when that entails, as it often does, not a clash between right and wrong, but among many rights. Seen in that light, ours is an important role that has implications far beyond any one item in the library or any one uncomfortable confrontation that we would prefer to avoid. Our responsibility is the defense of access to ideas, to information, esthetic pleasure, to recreation in its literal sense of re-creation, and to knowledge or at least to the process that leads to knowledge.

So it really is not the one book or the one viewpoint that is at issue here, but the defense of ideas that is our concern. I still believe that the best solution to the problem of access is to add positively to the store of ideas, not negatively to reduce it. ■

Footnotes:

¹Lester Asheim, "The Librarian's Responsibility: Not Censorship but Selection," in Frederic Mosher, ed., *Freedom of Book Selection* (Chicago: ALA, 1954), 95-96.

²Sanford Berman, "Inside Censorship," *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* (Spring 1977), 2124.